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John Richards, Review of Andrew Causey, *Stanley Spencer: Art as a Mirror of Himself*. Lund Humphries, Farnham & Burlington VT. 192 pp., 85 colour and 30 b&w illus. ISBN 978-1-84822-126-8. £45.

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Andrew Causey has written perceptively about Stanley Spencer on previous occasions, so the appearance of this monograph is very welcome, albeit coloured by the reflection that it turns out to have been the author's swansong. It fills a distinct gap, because although there has been a great deal of writing of one kind or another about Spencer since his death in 1959, much of the most alert analysis has been locked into catalogue entries and essays. There have also been biographies, starting with Maurice Collis's *Stanley Spencer* (1962), whose pioneering use of Spencer's tumultuous private writings set the tone for many subsequent discussions. The most infamous of these was Louise Collis's *A Private View of Stanley Spencer* (1972), which probably did more damage and for all the wrong reasons to Spencer's reputation than any of the overt attacks made on his work during his lifetime. It is significantly omitted from Causey's bibliography. Kenneth Pople's long biography of 1991 is useful, though it suffers from being reverential in the wrong way towards Spencer himself and is over-freely interpretative of the paintings. It is not, of course, that Spencer does not invite interpretation. It is just a matter of how it is done.

Any extensive exposure to Spencer's historiography would suggest that he is difficult to write about without recourse to one of the several reductive tropes which

infect his reputation: the naive village genius, the outsider, the sexual misfit, the anti-modernist, the little Englander. The list could be extended, and even more horribly. That it is so often to be found in the hands of Spencer's admirers (or those who imagine themselves to be so) and detractors alike reveals its deficiencies. There is no room in a review for any extended demolition of this stuff, and perhaps no need, for Causey himself steers deftly past most of the detritus.

The book is divided into an introduction and nine chapters which track the various phases of Spencer's career, each one focused to some extent on a theme announced by the chapter title; "Marriage to the World"; "Where the Spirit Moves Me"; "War Rebirth and a 'New Me'" etc. This gives something of the character of an essay to each chapter, an essay directed by a relatively small number of key paintings from each phase.

The unity of the book is assured by the introduction, one of the most penetrating pieces of Spencer criticism of recent times. Here Causey addresses head-on some of the most persistent bad critical habits in relation to Spencer. His judgements are pertinent and sound. The old habit of equating Spencer with a rather ill-defined concept of 'primitive', often even more loosely defined in terms of an imperfectly understood 'Giottesque', is firmly handled. Causey points out that "while Spencer's work was clearly influenced by the early Italian painters, it was not *like* theirs", emphasising the complexity of Spencer's place in relation both to the artistic past and to modernity: "[he] follows western art traditions since the Renaissance but also disrupts them." Nowhere is Causey's grasp of Spencer's artistic personality more acutely shown than in his engagement with Nikolaus Pevsner's definition of Spencer as a mannerist. This is

arguably the single most perceptive observation on the artist ever made, and Causey is quite right to associate with it what he defines as Spencer's "different type of composition, complex and unstable, and one that no other English artist of Spencer's generation was capable of." I would part company, though, with Causey's preference for sixteenth-century Flemish models in this context rather than the Italians Pevsner had in mind. Anyone interested in Spencer who saw the recent *Pontormo e Rosso* exhibition in Florence will have noticed affinities with Spencer's articulation of heightened emotional states by a combination of 'distortion' (a term Spencer himself vigorously denied) and impassive facial expressions. In support of his reading, Causey includes a full-page colour plate of Pieter Brueghel's *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1564, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). This is all very well but the space would have been better used for a plate of the great and forbidding *Double Nude Portrait: The Artist and his Second Wife*, the so-called 'Leg of Mutton Nude' (1937, Tate), the most significant omission from a generally well illustrated book and from Causey's discussion.

Causey is good on those aspects of Spencer's art which have caused the greatest dismay to some of his viewers, including the Royal Academicians who excluded *The Dustmen* and *St Francis and the Birds* from the 1935 RA summer exhibition. But he is surely attributing to Spencer too conventional a connection between style and ideology when he claims that the *St Francis* demonstrates that "[Spencer] recognised that the remnants of classical culture, to which he had always stood ambivalent, had been appropriated by the dictators." There is no need to doubt Spencer's loathing of bullies of all kinds (as witness his hostility to St Paul, who "sounds

like a Nazi to me”), but the connection as made by Causey is just too pat, too generically attached to a climate of 1930s anti-Fascism, to be convincing.

Causey has commendably little time for the myth of Spencer as some kind of holy fool, pointing out that “in his letters there is the subtlety of thought as well as the wit of a man who might otherwise appear to have been entirely tied up in himself.” He appreciates, as so many have not, that Spencer developed a persona of this kind as a defensive measure, and thus partly absolves those who too easily buy into the parochial holy-fool version of Spencer, because “looking for the sources of [his] reputation as an innocent, provincial, nervous of the pre-1914 art world, one finds that they can mostly be traced to Spencer himself.” Causey’s corrections are refreshing, and they set the tone for the analyses which follow:

There is no need to defend Spencer by claiming that remarkable things are achieved through innocence or that the ‘unspoiled’ primitive is superior through being untouched by metropolitan culture. Spencer was slow to mature emotionally, but professionally he was successful from the first on the testing and competitive London art stage. In so far as he later became an outsider in English art, it was from choice and not due to ignorance or any lack of ability to position himself in the wider world.

It is quite true that Spencer knew what he was doing and forcefully defended his right to do it (his family nickname was ‘Tiger’), and Causey understands better than most what the artist meant when he said to a friend “I am subtle, Richard, subtle”.

The book is rather strangely front-loaded. Causey is very good on the early paintings, and he takes on the challenges of Spencer’s work in the 1930s with considerable spirit. This is no mean feat, because paintings like *Sunflower and Dog Worship* and the *Beatitudes* series are hard to come to terms with - any confrontation

with Spencer that does not feel this and offer a critical acknowledgement of it is failing to do justice to the tensions which lie behind these formidable paintings. But thereafter the book, and perhaps Causey's enthusiasm, winds down. The post-war *Resurrection* paintings are treated perfunctorily and pretty much damned with faint praise: "it would be wrong to try and bundle them collectively into oblivion". Of the often eerily depopulated landscapes, desperately in need of serious critical attention, Causey says little that is new, falling back on a platitude: "Stanley seems to have maintained a high level of professional achievement". The portraits, other than those of Patricia Preece, get scant attention, and the last major series of Spencer's life, *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta* and its satellite paintings (1953-1959), is dismissed as an attempt to "recover a pre-First World War ambience and atmosphere with all its long-gone finery". This skates over the nuances of the Spencer family's social status in Cookham which this series articulates, and it crucially misses the paintings' collective engagement with the theme of judgement, to which we have Spencer's own statements as a key – he identified the subject of the apparently festive *Listening from Punts* (1954) as the woman taken in adultery (John 7-8), recognition of which adds an edge to her and her accusers' "finery".

These caveats aside, and because of the many insights of the early chapters in particular, Causey's book must be counted as one of the most important to have been written about Spencer. It is impossible to imagine anyone with an interest in the artist who would not learn a great deal from it, nor that any future account could safely ignore it. Causey understands Spencer's absolute seriousness, and he reveals many of the complexities which underpinned it. It might not be too much to claim that with the best

parts of this book, Spencer criticism has entered a new phase of flexibility and intelligence. It is a fitting memorial to both author and artist.